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ABSTRACT

A review of over 500 research studies identified 3 factors influencing the ability of Mexican American students to profit from the instruction currently available in United States colleges and universities: (1) a different language; (2) a different economic situation; and (3) a different response to social and personal interactions. Based on these factors, recommendations can be made for changing universities into pluralistic institutions. Institutions must implement an affirmative plan of action that insures equal education. Every effort must be made to provide financial assistance to capable Mexican American students. Cultural and linguistic values held by Mexican Americans should be positively reflected in the educational environment. A climate characterized by warm, personalized interactions with special attention given to the learning style of Mexican Americans must permeate the institution. A strong assistance program must help the districts decrease the underachievement of Mexican American students so they may fulfill high school academic requirements and enter college. Colleges and universities must create strong assistance programs to insure the success of Mexican American students in higher education. These recommendations--presented through the case of the Mexican Americans in the Southwest--apply to other minorities as well. (JHZ)

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INVOLVING MEXICAN AMERICANS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN UNTAPPED POTENTIAL

by

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INVOLVING MEXICAN AMERICANS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN UNTAPPED POTENTIAL

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Higher education in the United States continues to be, as it has been in the past, a white, middle-class, male establishment. There are growing problems for this establishment, however: first, an alarming decrease in enrollment, which translates into insufficient resources to meet student needs; and second, a continued racial and ethnic minority group underrepresentation which generates genuine concern that gains made a scant fifteen years ago are being eroded. At this point in the development of colleges and universities in the nation, a strong argument can be made for increasing minority participation in higher education which could lead to a dramatic social change: that of converting higher education into a more culturally diverse establishment.

The need for the inclusion of minorities in higher education has been described in a five-part report of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education in Colorado. The proportion of college-age minority students in Arizona, California, Colorado and New Mexico will increase from a current 35% to nearly 45% by the year 2000. The most significant population increase will occur among Hispanics who will constitute nearly 40% of all minority children under age 5 at that time. The minorities will become a majority of college-age eligible students. Unless members of these groups become well educated, it will be difficult for the nation to maintain its position of world leadership in the next century. A number of institutions have already undergone an increase in minority enrollment, however heedless or unreceptive to the change. In some cases the change has come about grudgingly, ungracefully and unproductively. In most instances the white, middle-class, male dominated establishments have remained unchanged.

The purpose of this paper is to make recommendations for a sucessful approach to changing universities into pluralistic institutions. These proposals, however, will specifically address the case of Mexican Americans in the Southwest. The following recommendations

are extrapolations from a review of research on factors affecting the academic achievement of Mexican American students. Over 500 research studies were reviewed by Hernandez and Descamps (1985) to identify factors that could account for this underachievement. The reviewers found, in general, three factors which influence the ability of Mexican Americans to profit from instruction as currently provided: a different language, a different economic situation and a different response to social and personal interactions. The recommendations, then, fall into the following categories: institutional plan of action, financial support, cultural and linguistic orientation, affective climate, and academic assistance.

Institutional Plan of Action

RECOMMENDATION 1: The institution will implement an affirmative plan of action insuring equal educational opportunity for all students. The plan will include the following: a) the development of an institutional statement of mission and goals by which the institution overtly commits itself to equity in education; b) the development of a sequence of check points by which to evaluate the implementation of stated goals, including timelines for achievement of recruiting and retention goals, as well as goals to increase the number of minority students graduating and receiving academic honors; c) the establishment of a process for monitoring the implementation of the planned activities; d) the appointment of an administrator, responsible to the president of the institution, for the implementation of this program, and e) the organization of advisory committees to the president made up by members of the Mexican American community.

Financial Support

RECOMMENDATION 2: Every effort must be exerted to provide financial assistance to capable Mexican American students in paying for tuition and books and in helping defray cost of living expenses. One of the most important factors in recruiting and retaining

Mexican Americans in higher education is financial assistance. For example, approximately one-third of all full-time California State University students depend upon financial assistance to meet their education expenses (Arciniega, 1985). Other southwestern institutions, in all probability, experience similar situations. As the number of Mexican American students desiring to participate in higher education increases, the amount of financial assistance must also increase. This assistance must come from the students' homes and/or outside sources, particularly the federal government.

Increased family support can come about if talented students are identified early in their schooling, and if they are given information relative to the forthcoming costs. Future students and their families can begin early programs of planning and saving through summer work. Additionally, they need information and assistance in obtaining scholarships and loans.

The primary source of student financial assistance in universities and community colleges is the federal government. Although families may increase their support by early planning this will not be sufficient. All efforts must be exerted to encourage continued federal assistance in terms of total aid, and in correcting inequities inherent in current methods of allocation. This support is essential in two ways: the first in making it possible for low-income students to attend college, the second in helping with living expenses to allow students to study without having to be employed. Talented students are often academically underprepared and need to devote to devote full time to study. Unfortunately, they burden themselves with part-time work to the detriment of their academic studies. The reality of their situation is: no work, no school. As a result students go through their course of studies in a part-time, erratic manner, often making decisions on the time it takes to complete a particular major, rather than on preference and ability. They become discouraged with the lack of relationship between hard work and good grades. The end result is more drop-outs without college degrees.

Cultural and Linguistic Orientation

RECOMMENDATION 3: Cultural and linguistic values held by Mexican Americans should be positively reflected in the educational environment. Greater numbers and proportions of Mexican American faculty must be appointed to make the academic environment reflect a pluralistic orientation. This is, perhaps, the most expeditious manner by which to achieve minority involvement. To date, however, it has been the least effective. Even in areas heavily populated by Mexican Americans there are very few tenured faculty members from this group. To meet this need and to address the excuse that a small number of minorities comprise the pool of available candidates with earned doctorates, bold university presidents and deans can encourage the appointment of talented Mexican Americans with advanced credentials stipulating that upon earning the doctorate their candidacy to tenured positions would be weighted heavily in their favor. Assignment and research support in their area of study would increase motivation to complete the doctorate.

Sensitivity toward the Hispanic culture is also expressed through the presence of related works of art, books, foods and festivities in the institution. In this manner the total environment reflects a bicultural and even multicultural orientation.

One significant obstacle for ethnic groups to reach mutual respect is the inability to communicate in their native languages. Acceptance of a person's or a group's language can be interpreted as acceptance of that person or group. An institution demonstrates acceptance of Spanish as being important when the administration, faculty and staff make efforts to communicate in that language in unofficial and official settings. A major goal for educational institutions in the Southwest should be to become bilingual academic communities to the highest extent possible. The importance of reading and writing in a second language can not be underestimated in an academic setting. This ability has always been one of the marks of an educated person. Furthermore, the proximity to the Mexican border and other Latin American countries offers a unique opportunity to conduct research in an international scope.

As the administration, faculty and staff increase their ability to use Spanish in academic life, students who have rudimentary and/or advanced skills in Spanish become important elements of that environment, thereby receiving support and encouragement. Spanish-speaking Mexican American faculty also become assets. For example, institutions in the Southwest should be able to award bilingual degrees in the social sciences, and very importantly, in the technical and medical sciences. They have the potential of becoming a major source of advanced technical training for a large portion of the Third World.

Affective Climate

RECOMMENDATION 4: A climate characterized by warm, personalized interactions with special attention given to the learning style of Mexican Americans must permeate the institution. Mexican American students succeed to a greater extent in an environment that is supportive to their efforts to grow and develop. Such a climate is one that is sensitive to their cultural values, their sense of worth and their language. Overt efforts must be made to help Mexican Americans and Anglos become better acquainted with each other's points of view without labeling either as "right" or "wrong". Many of these value differences are just a matter of emphasis rather than opposites. For example, Mexican Americans have a stronger family orientation than Anglos, or prefer cooperative efforts to competitive ones, or seek personalization and oral communication. A supportive climate makes possible for these preferences to be practiced not only in social exchanges but also in academic settings.

Courses that deal with historical, cultural and linguistic characteristics of the Southwest and the rich contribution made by the various ethnic groups that have populated it can be offered for academic credit. These courses should become a part of the academic program helping graduates become effective citizens of the region and the nation. Graduates of these institutions should be prepared to work with clients from various ethnic and linguistic groups. This training can be done most effectively in a university setting that is itself sensitive and responsive to cultural pluralism.

The Mexican American community is not involved in any aspect of higher education life, to a large extent, except as it might provide an untrained, non-professional, unskilled work force at the lowest levels of compensation. A positive affective climate requires the presence of "significant others" in positions of responsibility and in committees. Talented community representatives must be invited to participate in the major functions and work of the institution.

Academic Assistance

RECOMMENDATION 5: A strong assistance program must be facilitated to help school districts decrease the underachievement of Mexican American students so they may fulfill high school academic requirements and enter college. Because, in general, Mexican American students come to higher education as underachievers in English and Mathematics, specific steps must be taken to correct these deficiencies: a) universities need to prepare talented teachers of minority students who will help them succeed in all areas of the curriculum, b) teachers in elementary and secondary schools should receive university inservice training in methodologies to teach the basic subjects to minorities, c) school counselors must receive university training in developing skills to guide minority students toward college careers, and d) recruitment strategies that simultaneously articulate the entrance of students from high school into four-year institutions or community colleges are to be developed. In particular, for students entering universities, prior positive experiences in the college campus will have many long-range effects. For example, summer programs in academic and cultural events, academic year programs that allow higher education faculty to teach courses on high school campuses or students taking college courses for dual credit will predispose students to pursue a college career.

RECOMMENDATION 6: Colleges and universities must create strong assistance programs to insure the success of Mexican American students in higher education. Freshman and sophomore English and Spanish requirements need to be modified to help minority students achieve the

stated objectives of courses requiring English reading and writing skills. This recommendation should not be misunderstood to be a plea for reduced requirements. On the contrary, it is a plan to help Mexican Americans to acquire comparable skills but through a different path. For example, an entry level English skills test is administered at the freshman level. Mexican Americans scoring low in English should then be administered a Spanish skills test. Those scoring low in both English and Spanish should be assigned to a freshman English section and a Spanish section to be taken simultaneously with the explicit purpose of having the student develop overall language competence.

Freshman classes in mathematics need to be small, between 20 and 25, and highly structured. The specific course objectives, published prior to the beginning of class, must state submission dates for assignments. Continuous feedback to students on their progress, and opportunities to apply mathematics to other areas of the curriculum through extensive work in problem solving, must be provided.

A study skills and tutorial program must be made available for minority students. Academic counselors will refer students to these services as needed. These tutorials should be overtly encouraged by faculty and conducted by Mexican American tutors as much as possible. Modification of course withdrawal policies is necessary to avoid early failure on the part of Mexican American students. Late deadlines to withdraw from courses without failing must be allowed. Finally, a strong counseling program to assist students in making career and personal decisions must be made available.

This paper has presented recommendations to change public higher education into culturally pluralistic establishments reflecting their constituencies. A fair and democratic concept, long overdue and difficult to attain. The recommendations presented through the case of the Mexican Americans in the Southwest apply to other minorities as well.

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